I rise sometime later and my body is jostled with pain. Through my wince I see smoldering bits of metal a few yards away. I'm alive. That's the only thought that racks my brain. Until I see Cassie. She's drawing something in the dirt with a twig. I see butterflies, hearts, and a couple of suns. It's nice to know that she's having fun. My hand stings. I toss the chunk of glass into the rest of the junk. It makes a sound against the bits and pieces of metal.

"Are you feeling better?"

"How long was I out?" I ask.

"I don't know."

I look to my watch. It's cracked, but still working. I decide to see if my head can still do logic and math. I woke up at four, and the sun was just rising when I nearly got us killed by having the bright idea of dodging a police barricade by driving into oncoming traffic. It's about noon now, and I realize that I don't really care. I try to get to my feet, but fall backwards and bump myself against a tree. I look around for something, anything.

"Cassie, can you hand me that branch over there?"

I hold the stick in my hand and plunge it into the ground. I'm becoming quite good at pulling myself up in painful situations; perhaps I should make a hobby of it. The branch gets me to my feet, and that's all that matters. It's time to assess the damage. I still have jagged bits of glass in my chest, but for the most part it's stopped bleeding. Unlike my hand, which still has a light red drizzle. My shirt is torn up anyway, so I sacrifice it to create a bandage. I still have a jacket, so I won't freeze. Easily.

Here comes the hard part. I pull the pieces of glass out, one by one. Some of them went in deeper than others, but none of them poked or prodded anything too important. By the time I'm done, there's a small pile of broken glass by my foot speckled with streaks of red.

"Cassie, are you hurt?"

"I don't think so," she tells me. "Why is your hand—"

"I'd rather not talk about it," I say as I hobble over to the car.

There must be something worth salvaging among the smoking bits of car carcass. Any food we had is gone, but where is that metal thing I reached for? I kick over some dead leaves until I see a gleam. There it is. I hunch over, but can't quite make it. Cassie picks it up for me. A letter-opener, just a letter opener. It's sharper than your average butter knife, but I doubt that it would have saved my life. Still, it's better than nothing. I walk around to look for any other junk I can, but it seems that anything of use had smoldered up in the explosion.

I end up seeing a path of upturned dirt and broken twigs. That's the direction we came from, and that's the direction we need to get away from as quickly as possible. I'm surprised they didn't send in the chopper already. In this condition, I'll never get away quickly enough. I've got to keep them off of my trail.

"Died in a car fire" is a pretty good cause of death, but it's not too believable without any bodies. Still, even without them it'll keep them looking around here. I tell Cassie that we've got to get moving, right now. She doesn't question it. Why are you still listening to me!? Why did you ever listen to me? Do you really believe in me that much?

No steps were harder than the first few. I'm not unfamiliar with walking crippled. After I get back into the motions, I can fight back the pain. I don't think anything too serious is broken. I just have cuts and scrapes all over. Despite what Cassie said, I see bruises beginning to form. She must have stirred a bit during our earlier adventure. As long as she's walking, we can deal with it later.

Half an hour of walking and I'm winded. We stop. It's not far enough, but it'll have to do. At least for now. I sit on a rock while Cassie looks around the area, picking up

small stones and tossing them. She's trying to keep herself occupied. I don't know if that's consideration, or if that's naivety. At least she's able to move like that. All I'm able to do is take inventory.

I still hold that letter-opener in my hand. I still have my cracked watch. Beyond that all I have are the clothes on my back and my wallet within. Oh boy, six hundred dollars, we're saved now. I don't plan on heading back to civilization anytime soon, at least not the way we came. If we get to a city on the other side of the forest then so be it, but police are going to be all over the highway in that direction. Then I remember, the police said that Cassie was wearing a backpack. She still is.

She hands it to me and I look through it like it's a pot of gold. And it's the typical kindergarten clutter. We have crumpled up papers, crayons and pencils, and a lunch box—the contents within being an apple core, an empty pudding cup, and the crusts of a sandwich. I hand the backpack back to her. If there was ever a time I wish I didn't quit boy scouts, it would be now.

Once I'm able to stand again we get walking. Exhaustion from the lighter sleep of last night is finally catching up with me, although it may just be this splinted movement. We can't keep walking like this for too long, even if my own condition didn't prevent it. Cassie is a child and can't keep walking for hours on end. We can't very well stop though. It may just be an inkling of paranoia, but I feel like they're looking for us and getting closer.

My train of thought is interrupted by the rush of water. In between the spines of trees I can see a sun-bleached clearing up ahead. It's a river, the perfect place to stop, even for a brief moment. I quench my burning throat. Cassie is reluctant to drink from the waters of the great outdoors, and I don't really blame her. This is far from the crystal clear waters portrayed in brochures and nature shows. It's murky and it tastes like dirt. I can't summon water from thin air though, so it's the best I can do in the mere moment.

I look up and consider hoping for rainwater. There's not a cloud in the sky. Birds are chirping in pure bliss. A squirrel skids along branches above us knocking down a couple of acorns as it zooms past yellowed leaves. Dare I say that it seems all too peaceful. It's nice, especially after the brutality we both suffered this morning. This peace is dashed by my groaning stomach. I'm hungry. We're in the middle of

nowhere. And I still can't over the fact that I nearly got us both killed. My emotions finally caught up to me.

"I'm... I'm sorry Cassie, for everything," I finally muster.

She looks at me with an innocence in her eyes. She doesn't know the horrible things that I've done. I became a fool, just another idiot. I'd never call what she lived in before an ideal situation, but at least she could survive. I don't know a damn thing about wilderness survival. We're both going to starve out here. Or freeze. Whichever comes first. If I didn't get lucky, then all that would be left of us is a couple of scorched skeletons. Abusive life or not, anything is better than death.

"Why are you sorry? You were right; all those things that Daddy did. I knew they weren't right—Mr. Wright, are you crying?"

"Cassie, look at where we are. We're in the middle of the forest, god-knows how far away from civilization. The police are still after me. I messed up. I put both of our lives in danger, and for what—?"

"Thank you."

"What?"

"You didn't see everything, Mr. Wright. This isn't the first time I ran away from home. I don't ever want to go back. I'd rather die out here than go back." "Cassie, you're what, six years old? you shouldn't be talking like that." "Just turned seven last month," Cassie said, her lips curling in a tear-filled smile. "Do you really believe that dying would be better than going back there?" I ask. My mind swings like a pendulum through emotions of horror and morbid curiosity. I don't want to dig this hole deeper, but that spark that started this all is demanding to know.

"It's what I deserve. I'm an ungrateful little brat that just deserves to die," Cassie says. Tears start pouring lose.

"Who told you that?" I ask. I want to say that I know the answer, but as I've been proven time and time again life continues to throw you a surprise. Cassie looks to the river.

"Mommy did. She always said that she and Daddy were happy before I came along. Said I'm a horrible person for making them fight like that."

And I thought that the glass hurt.

"Cassie, that's not true. They're the terrible people. You're a wonderful child. I'm sure you're smart, well-behaved, and so many other wonderful things."

"No I'm not Mr. Wright. I can't do anything right! I tried to make them happy, but I couldn't even get that right."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Each word spoken was slower than the last.

Cassie doesn't answer. She doesn't have to.